Talk to Weps Before

By Ltjg. Ted Essenfeld

I learned firsthand how poor communication, improper planning, and failure to follow procedures can get someone killed. Fortunately, no one was hurt and the only consequence of this incident is damaged pride, sore typing fingers, and several pounds of my butt that I'm sure the captain will be hanging onto. That's a small price to pay compared to a sailor's life, so I'll call this a happy ending but the "what if?" is severe.

Fresh off the 0400-0700 CIC watch, I was at breakfast when the beginning of the day's live-fire exercise on the flight deck was announced over the ship's 1MC. As weapons officer, I was more than a little torqued that I hadn't been included in the exercise safety brief. Since I reported aboard three months ago, it had been drilled into my head that operational safety is paramount, and that every evolution requires a detailed brief. We had always conducted daily operations briefs in the wardroom, and now returning to port after a long exercise, we had tested all of our ship's war-fighting capabilities. I was tasked with attending every live-fire exercise as a safety observer, whether ship's force or embarked units were shooting.

I excused myself from my pancakes, stopped in my office to pick up my white hard hat, ear and eye protection, and a portable radio to communicate with the bridge, and headed topside.

Live-fire exercises were now old hat. In fact, a feeling of complacency seemed to have permeated the ship as we headed home. Our daily operations briefs were being cancelled or not even scheduled. Unfortunately, such briefs generally included the safety briefs for any special evolutions, including gunfire exercises. That meant we had to brief any gunfire events at a different time and location.

I already had my skivvies in a wad because I had been left out of several previous safety briefs, and I had given my department head an earful because the CO was being briefed off-line. Events weren't happening the way they were supposed to.

Back to my near-tragedy. I arrived on the flight deck that morning to see embarked Marines and my gunner's mates setting up the firing line. Targets were carefully strung over the stern, and the firing line was clearly marked. Everyone wore flack jackets and Kevlar helmets, and sleeves were down—everyone was in battle dress. I was thrilled to see eye protection and ear plugs for all. They had even brought out sunscreen and water because it was a hot, tropical day. All safety bases appeared to be covered. Usually at this time I would ask the bridge to hoist the Bravo flag and to secure the flight deck, but I looked to the yardarm and saw Bravo already flapping in the breeze, then I heard the boatswain's mate of the watch secure the flight deck. Things were working the way they were supposed to be.

e You SHOOT!

Or so it seemed.

I checked the port and starboard catwalks to make sure no one was down there, and I asked the bridge if the after lookout had been sent below decks to the line-handling room. I was told he was below. The Marine OIC also took a look around, didn't see anyone on the catwalks, and stationed two of his men to be observers to ensure no one came onto the catwalks from below decks. We were ready to go. I called the bridge and got permission to commence firing.

The first two strings went without a hitch. Marines lined up their SAWs (squad automatic weapon, or belt-fed machine gun) and quickly went through their drills. As the third string of shooters was taking the line, the major had everyone step back, and he began walking aft. That's when I saw the after lookout standing behind the after, port .50-caliber machine gun. The gun was mounted, stowed, and covered—the perfect obstruction to keep the lookout out of my line of vision. Earlier, I hadn't walked the catwalk to be sure he had gone below decks. I only looked, didn't see the man, and assumed he was where he was supposed to be. You know what they say about assuming.

Meanwhile, "Cease fire!" had already been called to change shooters and reload, so we quickly pulled the lookout off station and sent him below. His relief arrived at the same time and he, too, was instructed to take station below decks in the line-handling room. Once the range was clear, with no "invisible men" anywhere (I looked *really* closely this time) we continued the firing exercise. The remainder of the event went without a hitch and everyone came away with some valuable training.

What if things had been different? It's likely a Sailor could have been killed or seriously wounded.

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o one will get hurt.

Among the weapons fired during the exercise was the M249, belt-fed, light machine gun. Marines refer to it as a SAW, or squad automatic weapon.

An investigation revealed several deficiencies. First, failure to follow procedures left several people unaware of what was going on. Holding a safety brief on the mess decks or in the CO's stateroom without including key personnel was an oversight.

Second, it initially appeared as though no ship's force safety observer had been assigned to the exercise, despite being required by departmental standard operating procedures. I only went out there because I heard the 1MC announcement during breakfast. I was pleased, though, to see my LCPO already out there (I learned later he had been at the brief, so departmental procedures *were*, in fact, covered).

Third, the bridge didn't back us up by ensuring the lookout was safely out of the way. Upon talking with the lookout after the incident, I learned he had asked to go below decks when the guns were being set up, but he was told to remain on station. He took this to mean throughout the exercise. When asked if he was scared during the shoot he said, "No, I knew they weren't shooting in my direction." He should have been scared. Ricochets don't travel in any intended direction.

Fourth was a lack of situational awareness that could have cost the lookout his life. Common sense would tell anyone the business end of a firing machine gun is never safe. The Sailor assumed the bullets would go where the gun was aimed—about 15 feet to the left of his head.

These deficiencies were easily corrected. As weapons officer, I now demand to be included in all safety briefings involving weapons—no matter what unit is shooting. I might be aware of safety concerns an embarked unit might not consider. There will also be a thorough walk-through of adjacent spaces and catwalks before any gunshoot.

Meanwhile, the bridge, safety observers, and all affected watchstanders will communicate clearly to ensure everyone knows his station. If everyone involved knows the task at hand and the intended goal—along with their responsibilities—no one will get hurt. Everyone will be where they're supposed to be, doing what they're supposed to be doing, and every evolution will be a success.

We were lucky, and I learned a valuable lesson.

Commanding officer's note: The tendency toward complacency is common aboard a ship heading home at the end of an exercise or a deployment. We learned many valuable lessons from this "near-miss" and hope you will, too. By sharing cases like this with each other, we can help prevent tragedies—silence only ensures our shipmates are fated to repeat our mistakes.

Navy photo by PH1 Martin Maddock